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ABSTRACT

A study sought to describe family interaction as it has been taking place in a television family of the nineties--the Simpsons. Twelve episodes of the program were videotaped, transcriptions were made of the portions of the programs which contained family interactions, and 1,670 communication behaviors in the material were coded. Each behavior was coded for mode: going toward, going against, and going away; these were then subdivided into 11 categories. Results indicated that in the Simpson family, the parents clearly dominated the communication flow. Overall, 71.8% of the interactions were supportive. The primary mode of communication was giving information, followed closely by attacking. The most frequent family roles were spouses giving information to each other, followed closely by children giving information to parents. Supportive communication was centered in spouses, while siblings were the most conflictual family members. Findings suggest that the Simpsons provide a model which is primarily positive but also a model which is less positive than that of the families observed in the 1975-76 season. It is apparent that the stereotypical role behaviors evident in the earlier family television programming are not in evidence in "The Simpsons." The school environment appears to be portrayed rather negatively, and Bart and Homer, especially, do not respond very favorably to school-related situations. Further analysis might examine the style of language choices in addition to content. (Two tables of data are included and 31 references are attached.) (MG)

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Changes in Traditional Television Content: Family Interaction Patterns on The Simpsons

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The image of the family on primetime television has undergone a number of changes since the idyllic days of family life on Father Knows Best and Leave it to Beaver. Ella Taylor (1989) reminds us of the age of social relevance reflected in the 1970s families on All in the Family and Sanford and Son, and the return to the idyllic in the families of the mid-1980s in such shows as The Cosby Show and Family Ties. Presently, Family Ties has left the air except for reruns and The Cosby Show, now in its seventh season, is being challenged by an unusual primetime family, The Simpsons. Is it possible that the Simpsons will reflect the family of the Nineties? If it does, what kind of a family is this? Further, what impact might this family have on viewers?

In response to the possibility that the Simpsons may become the television family of the Nineties, there is evidence to support this notion. The popularity of the program is demonstrated by both the passion of its viewers and its position in the ratings. It has been described as "swiftly leap/ing/ from an object of cultists' affection to

the cover of national magazines and into the realm of pop icons" ("On saving the world," 1990). Newsweek noted that it has "emerged as a breakaway ratings hit, an industry trendsetter, a merchandising phenomenon, a cultural template and, among its most fanatical followers, a viewing experience verging on the religious" (Waters, 1990). In fact, a SWF who placed an ad in the cupid column in my local paper claimed she was "sentimental, sensitive, sensuous and into the Simpsons" ("Friendly Persuasions," 1990).

In addition to viewer allegiance, the popularity of the program is evident by its ratings. It was Fox Broadcasting's most popular show last season and this season's opener, placed against Cosby on Thursday nights, came within one-tenth of a ratings point of beating Cosby ("In ratings family feud," 1990). Thus, one can reasonably argue that in terms of viewer passion as well as ratings, the Simpsons warrant attention as an important television family.

In response to the question as to what kind of a family this is, many critics have asserted that The Simpsons offers a primarily negative image of family life. Time put the show with Roseanne and Married. . . With Children in the

category of "anti-family sitcoms, exploring the squalid underbelly of domestic life" and described them as a "grungy, bickering lot" (Zoglin, 1990). A review of the program in the New York Times described the family as nagging and quarrelsome, and Homer as "the harried dad who insists on being grouchy" (O'Connor, 1990). Jeremy Gerard called them a "contentious working-class bunch," similar to the families on Roseanne and Married . . . With Children" (1990, p. 13). Another writer claimed that the show depicts life as a "comic chaos where values are garbled, feelings are ignored and loved ones keep colliding like bumper cars at an amusement park (Morgenstern, 1990 p. 12). Newsweek claimed that Homer "constantly bickers with his wife," that Bart is "obnoxiousness incarnate" and that Lisa is "gratingly precocious" (Waters, p. 58).

A program which is this popular and yet has generated so much negative response is of particular interest to those who study media content with an interest in the models provided for real life behavior. Many critics are fearful of what the program is teaching youngsters. The root of

this fear lies in Bandura's description of social learning theory.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977) theory explains that one learns new behaviors not only by actually performing those behaviors, but also by observation of others' performances. In many instances it is not necessary to engage in repetitive trial and error processes in order to acquire a sizeable repertoire of patterns of behavior. Television provides a rich source of behaviors to observe and from which to learn, and many have concluded that television can be a potent resource for social learning (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986; Gunter, 1984; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Watkins, 1985). Singer, Singer and Rapaczynsi, for example, noted that television is "as much a potential source of influence as the home environment, the parents' behavioral style, and their socioeconomic milieu" (1984, p. 73).

While the results of research do not unequivocally support the theory, a large body of both experimental and nonexperimental research does support it. Dorr (1986), for instance, cited several examples of experimental research

which typically followed a pattern in which the experimental subjects viewed a violent film clip, the control subjects viewed a neutral film clip and observations of later behavior indicated that the experimental subjects exhibited more aggressive behavior than the control subjects. Dorr also described later modifications to this design which included having subjects watch television in their own living quarters making the conditions more realistic.

A number of nonexperimental studies also support the theory. Panel studies, for example, follow a population of subjects over time and correlate the viewing of violent television with aggressive behavior. These studies indicate a positive relationship between viewing violent television programming and aggressive behavior (Dorr, 1986). Although the results have not been universally supportive, Dorr noted that "there is, by now, conclusive evidence that television content can affect children's information, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 69).

Studies of imitated behaviors are not limited to studies of aggression. Chesebro (1987), for example, has observed that values embedded in television programming are

important models for viewers. Pearl, Bouthilet, and Lazar concluded that the behaviors in "television families almost certainly influence viewers' thinking about real-life families (1982, p. 70). Others have also concluded that television families are used by viewers as models for their own behavior in families (Greenberg, 1980; Kalter, 1988; Stroman, 1984). In another example, Greenfield noted that when Fonzie applied for a library card on Happy Days there was "a five-fold increase in the number of children applying for library cards in the United States" (1984, p. 48). Thus, as Jeffres concluded, "the overwhelming majority of social scientists would respond without hesitation that TV exerts a powerful impact on children's perceptions and their imitative learning" (1986, p. 213).

Interaction Patterns in Television Families

Noting the salience of Bandura's theory, McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn and Fallis (1982) were among several writing in the National Institute of Health report calling for research which describes the interaction patterns between family members in television families. They expressed concern about the potential impact of these

interactions as models for general interpersonal communication as well as for family interactions.

Content analyses of television family interaction patterns are scarce, however. Greenberg and his associates (1980) conducted a comprehensive analysis of television content during the 1975-78 television seasons. In their analysis of family interaction patterns, they concluded that most interactions reflected stereotypical family roles: husband gives direction to wife; wife seeks support from husband; mothers do not oppose and attack; children petition; parents petition least; mothers direct; wives and children do not direct; the primary communicators are husband/wife pairs (Greenberg, Hines, Buerkel-Rothfuss & Atkin, 1980). Additionally, they reported that 88 percent of all family interactions were positive, constructive ones, and that conflict was concentrated in husband/wife pairs, and pairs which include a brother.

In an analysis of parenting behaviors on television, Dail and Way (1985) concluded that during the 1982 season television fathers were expressive and nurturing and also

more active parents than mothers, and noted the importance of these behaviors as models for real life behavior.

Two analyses of sibling behaviors on television found that while the interactions were primarily positive, compared to the analysis of Greenberg et al., they were remarkably conflictual. The sibling interactions in The Cosby Show, Family Ties, and Growing Pains were 58% positive, compared to 87% positive in the study of family interaction in the 1975-76 season (Larson, 1989). A second study, of television siblings from the 1950s family sitcoms of Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, and Ozzie and Harriet, found that those sibling interactions were 65% positive and 35% negative, also quite different from the report on the 1975-76 season (Larson, 1990).

Skill and Wallace (1990) have recently reported on power interactions in primetime television families. They concluded that, in general, more family communicative acts were positive than negative, and that intact families were more harmonious than were non-intact or mixed families. They observed that the communication behaviors of brothers

were disharmonious, and that sisters/daughters were relatively inconsequential to the family power structure.

To summarize, the portrayal of family interaction on television from the 1950s to the late 1980s has been primarily positive. Interaction patterns have tended to reflect stereotypical patterns in which parents give directions, children accept directions, parents and spouses give support and children accept support. Conflict which does occur has seemed to be concentrated in spousal and sibling relationships, with brothers being notably conflictual in their communication behaviors. Sisters and daughters have been relatively inconsequential as family communicators. Fathers have recently been portrayed less stereotypically as especially nurturing, expressive parents.

The study reported here sought to describe family interaction as it has been taking place in a television family of the Nineties--the Simpsons. The Simpsons, a primetime cartoon, is aired on Fox Broadcasting Network. It features the Simpson family which consists of Homer, the father who works at a nuclear power plant, his wife Marge, a homemaker, and three children: Bart, the fourth grade son

around whose problems many episodes center; Lisa, the second grade daughter who plays a jazz saxophone terrifically well; and baby Maggie, who does not speak but is noticeable because of the sucking noises she makes with her pacifier.

Method

All twelve episodes of The Simpsons were videotaped during the winter and spring of 1990 beginning with the season opener Jan. 14. Transcriptions were made of the portions of the programs which contained family interactions in order to facilitate coding of the program material.

A communication behavior was operationally defined as a verbal or nonverbal message directed from one family member to another. One behavior ended and another began when the communicator changed or when the type of communication content changed. In all, 1670 communication behaviors were coded.

Each behavior was coded as to the sender and receiver of the message. The sender/receiver pair was most frequently a dyad (e.g. Homer/Bart), although there were a number of instances in which a family member addressed more

than one family member or the family as a group. This pairing was coded as Homer/family, etc.

Then, using the method developed by Greenberg et al. (1980), each behavior was coded for mode. There were three modes: Going toward, Going against and Going away. Each of the modes was further subdivided as follows:

Going toward

1. Offering information
2. Seeking information
3. Contributing and entertaining--including phatic communication
4. Supporting, reinforcing
5. Petitioning, requests for support
6. Directing, giving instructions
7. Accepting support, being grateful
8. Accepting direction, following instructions

Going against

9. Opposing, disagreeing
10. Attacking, criticizing, provoking

Going away

11. Evading, ignoring

Intercoder reliability levels between the primary coder and two others was .91 coding communicating pair and .95 coding mode, using Holsti's formula (Wimmer & Dominick, 1987).

Results

Communication Flow

Before discussing the direction of interactions, the family roles which dominated communication will be described (See Table 1). In the Simpson family, the parents clearly dominated the communication flow. Communication between spouses was the largest family role category followed by communication directed by parents to children. With regard to specific dyads involved in these categories, nearly equal numbers of communication behaviors were directed from Marge to Homer as were directed from Homer to Marge. However, with regard to parent/child communication, this family role configuration was dominated by communication from Homer to Bart.

Direction of Communication

With regard to the proportion of supportive interactions compared to conflictual interactions, the first

eight modes of communication were considered supportive and the last three modes were considered conflictual. Overall, 71.8% of the interactions were supportive. (See Table 1)

In terms of family role interactions, the greatest proportion of supportive communication was sent by children to parents. The lowest proportion of supportive communication was between siblings.

Modes of Communication Behaviors

A second area of interest concerned the modes of communication behaviors which were predominant (see Table 2). The primary mode of communication was giving information followed closely by attacking. The most frequent family roles giving information were spouses followed closely by children giving information to parents. In a breakdown of these types of communication by specific dyads, Homer gave information to Marge slightly more often than Marge to Homer. With regard to communication between children and parents, Bart and Lisa communicated information to parents approximately equally as frequently. However, all of Bart's information to parents was directed to Homer,

while Lisa gave information equally as frequently to Marge as to Homer.

Attacking behavior was fairly evenly distributed between all family roles except child/parent. Within specific dyads, Marge directed more attacking and criticism toward Homer than any other partner in a dyad. Between siblings, nearly equal amounts of attacking communication was directed by Bart to Lisa as by Lisa toward Bart.

Parents were the primary givers of directions and Homer gave directions (primarily to Bart) more than twice as often as Marge. Children were the primary followers of directions and most of those were Homer's, followed by Bart.

Supportive communication was centered in spouses. They were the primary petitioners, givers, and accepters of support. This was followed closely by parental support to children, of which more was from Homer than Marge. Bart was the primary receiver of Homer's support.

Siblings were the most conflictual family members. In the Simpson family, Lisa and Bart were virtually equally conflictual.

Discussion

Again, assuming that viewers do learn from and imitate models available to them on television, the Simpsons provide a model which is primarily positive. At the same time, it is a model which is less positive than the families in the 1975-76 season (88% positive) which Greenberg et al., studied.

Further, the communication modes which the Simpsons engage in are remarkably diverse. The stereotypical behaviors which were reported by Greenberg et al., are not apparent in this family. The mother has a central role in this family. She gives direction to Homer more than twice as often as Homer directs her. Further, Homer seeks support from Marge nearly three times more often than the she seeks support from him. Marge also is not reluctant to engage in conflict. Marge accounts for 21.5% of the conflictual communication, compared to 24.4% by Homer, 21.9% from Bart and 15.9% by Lisa.

Interestingly, we also have an especially active father in this family. Homer gives directions to children more

than twice as often as Marge does, and offers more support to them as well.

The children in this family do not function stereotypically either. While children were the priumary followers of directions, they were not the primary petitioners for support. Spouses more frequently sought support from each other than children sought it from parents. Further, fully 20.9% of the support was offered by a child to a parent, and 25% of the support was accepted by a parent from a child.

In conclusion, it is certainly apparent that the stereotypical role behaviors evident in the earlier family television programming are not in evidence in this program. Further, in terms of communication and family roles, the criticism in the popular press hardly seems warranted. The Simpsons, as a television family of the Nineties, exhibit primarily positive behavior toward each other. The communication patterns are remarkably rich and diverse in terms of both the distribution of the modes of communication and the lack of stereotypical communication associated with

various family roles. As models for social learning, these family members have much to commend them.

At the same time, the criticisms of the models of behavior should not be cavalierly dismissed. It is possible that the critics are not really objecting to the critical substance of the communication within this particular family, but rather their style. Future analysis might examine the style of language choices in addition to content. Also, it is possible that the critical response is primarily to the communication between family members and outsiders. The school environment, for example, appears to be portrayed rather negatively, and Bart and Homer, especially, do not respond to school related situations very favorably. Further, Homer's attitude toward his work and his superiors does not appear to be very favorable either. The study of the portrayal of these institutions may be warranted. It may be that The Simpsons embodies a family which truly does hang together against the world, but is finding the world a difficult place in which to make one's way.

Footnotes

1. Complete definitions and additional coding information is available from the author.

2. Complete data pertaining to each dyad is available on request.

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Table 1

Family Role Interactions by Direction

	Positive	Negative
All roles		
(n = 1670)	71.8	28.2
Parent/Child		
(n = 413)	77.7	22.3
Child/Parent		
(n = 348)	79.3	20.7
Spouse		
(n = 444)	69.1	30.9
Sibling		
(n = 268)	58.2	41.8
Other		
(n = 197)	70.6	29.4

χ^2 (4, N = 1670) = 42.995, p <.01. Tabled values represent percentages; group n's are in parentheses.

Table 2

Family Role Interactions by Mode

	Parent/ Child	Child/ Parent	Spouse	Sib.	Other
Goes Toward					
Gives information (n = 268)	20.2	23.1	25.4	14.6	16.8
Seeks information (n = 133)	30.1	21.1	24.1	14.3	10.5
Contributes (n = 99)	24.2	29.3	19.2	19.2	8.1
Supports (n = 239)	31.0	21.0	32.6	9.2	6.3
Petitions (n = 163)	14.1	25.2	30.1	16.0	14.7
Directs (n = 186)	44.6	11.3	18.3	11.3	14.5
Accepts support (n = 44)	25.0	27.3	36.4	2.3	9.1

Table 2 (continued)

Accepts direction					
(n = 65)	16.9	50.8	16.9	12.3	3.1
Goes Against					
Oppose					
(n = 205)	15.6	20.5	32.2	23.9	7.8
Attack					
(n = 258)	23.6	11.6	24.0	24.4	16.3
Goes Away					
Evades					
(n = 10)	--	--	90.0	10.0	--

χ^2 (40, N = 1670) = 208.685, p <.01. Tabled values represent percentages; group n's are in parentheses.